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Ben Hutchinson. *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2018.

Toloo Riazi

University of California, Santa Barbara, triazi@umail.ucsb.edu

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Abstract

Review of Ben Hutchinson. *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2018.

Keywords

Comparative literature, history, future

Ben Hutchinson. *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2018. 152 pp.

Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction focuses not only on the history of comparative literature but also the future of it. Across five chapters: “Metaphors of Reading,” “Practices and Principles,” “History and Heroes,” “Disciplines and Debates,” and “The Futures of Comparative Literature,” Ben Hutchinson demonstrates the transformation of comparative literature in a historical as well as cultural context and succeeds at fleshing out the merits of comparative literature in unfolding how “literary cultures have learned to view each other” (5). In Hutchinson’s view, comparison as a major source of knowledge plays a fundamental role in expanding the horizons of critical thinking and learning because “there is more than one way of being and more than one way of doing things. Looking beyond ourselves is how we learn” (3). *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction* assumes a multidisciplinary approach and succeeds in bringing into dialogue various disciplines and historical periods in an effort to provide a first step toward a definition of comparative literature and to indicate how in an era of migration and border crossing, “the cross-cultural agenda of comparative literature has become increasingly central to the future of the Humanities” (5).

The first chapter addresses some basic questions that frame the bulk of the book: What is literature? Why do we compare texts? Who can conduct a comparative literature study? As suggested by Hutchinson, when we want to make sense of a text, we compare it to other texts and consequently put ourselves in an already existing framework of references (41). From there, the author identifies comparative literature as the study of “cross-cultural connections” and the perception of “multiplicity” (3). For this very reason, comparative literature becomes pregnant with the idea of non-belonging (12) and “being in ‘no place’” (13).

The second chapter, the most important chapter of the book in this writer’s view, analyzes the major criteria for comparing literature. As Hutchinson states, comparative literature is a matter of “themes and techniques” (13). He fleshes out the practices of close reading versus distant reading and draws attention to numerous ways in which we might compare texts, among them period versus region or historical and geographical comparisons. One of the most conventional ways of categorizing texts is canon versus counter-canon, which has its own problematics. Hutchinson asks if, for instance, we should read the great works of European tradition or counter-canons of lesser known writers. He answers that “it is only possible to construct a counter-canon after having first established a canon, but then this in turn would seem to give cultural priority to a predetermined ‘tradition’” (37). Genres versus styles and writers versus readers are the last classifications discussed

in the second chapter. While stylistic conventions refer to *ways* of writing, generic conventions deal mostly with the content (39). In closing this chapter, Hutchinson asks the reader a question: is comparative literature just seen from the angle of reception studies or authorial ones? He claims that comparative literature should be analyzed not only from the angle of scholarly criticism, “as a question of reception,” but also from the “authorial perspective,” that is to say, “as an issue of creation” (9). The “authorial perspective” indicates that comparative literature starts from the mind of the writer. From there it goes to the mind of the reader. Intertextuality, the interaction between different texts (13), is a mode of authorial comparison (41). In other words, “writers often anticipate and invite comparative approaches to their works” (41) since literature is the juxtaposition of similarity and difference, and “it is writers, not readers, who set the tune” (45).

In the third chapter, Hutchinson historicizes the evolution of comparative literature in broad spans of historical time, such as colonialism, modernity, big waves of Jewish migration, and the twentieth century. Hutchinson highlights the importance of the history of comparative literature: by knowing its constant political history, we will be able to understand its current state as well as its possible future. He draws attention to the historical emphasis on Europe and analyzes the history of comparative literature from a threefold perspective: how European literature has been compared inside Europe; how it has been compared outside Europe; and how literatures outside Europe, such as Persian and Arabic, have been compared among themselves (46-47). The author makes a historical connection between the history of comparative philology, comparative literature, and eventually, cultural colonialism.

In chapter four, literary theory, cultural studies, postcolonialism, world literature, translation studies, and reception studies are introduced in close connection with comparative literature as an *indiscipline* (84) that holds a very strategic position between language, literature, and culture (13). The author thoroughly explores the problematic quasi-colonial European vision of the world that only in the twentieth century became more global (99). In the last chapter, Hutchinson investigates comparative literature’s place in the crossfire of the humanities and states that comparative literature can benefit from other disciplines, the “universalization of ideas” (120), and social sciences.

Perhaps today, more than ever, reading *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction* is important. In the era of human trafficking and bans, comparative literature can welcome new voices into its discipline and become home to “those who are transnational not out of desire, but despair” (117). Hence, within the utopian dream of comparative literature, it is possible to understand other ways in which different cultures can interact (13). It affirms George Steiner’s statement that great literature or language should be aware of the “necessary presence of the other” (qtd. in 80). It is comparative literature’s mission to embrace all people

equally, a mission that has yet to be accomplished completely. *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction* will appeal to scholars and students alike working on literary studies, comparative literature, and history of comparative literature.

Toloo Riazi
University of California, Santa Barbara